SPEECHLESS
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Psalm 99
Exodus 34:29-35
Luke 9:28-38

"And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen."
Luke 9:36b (NRSV)

I can't gaze straight at God.
Just as you have to look slightly to the side
of a distant twinkling star to see it, so I have to
let my sight glance off God in order to see God.
The concept of a God who can create all the planets,
galaxies, quasars, trees, and flowers suggests
a glory that is too bright for direct viewing,
a song of exultation too loud for unplugged ears.

Kristen Johnson Ingram
"Stand Still," *Weavings,* January/February 2007

In the silence of this hour, speak to us of eternal things, O God.
We come here out of the noise of our busy lives.
In this quiet hour, speak your word of love and encouragement
and challenge. In Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

There are some experiences in this life that require no commentary. There are some experiences in this life of ours the only appropriate response to which is silence. Have you noticed how, after a particularly gorgeous and passionate performance by the Chicago Symphony of something like Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings,* for instance, that there is a moment, at the end, when the audience sits in silence, almost as if savoring the beauty, almost not breathing—you can hear a pin drop—not wanting to diminish the beauty by clapping? There are some experiences in this life that are not enhanced much by efforts to explain. A musicologist could explain Samuel Barber's technique, the use of unusual harmonics, the creative orchestration, the crescendos and pianissimos, but it doesn't help much. In fact, sometimes explanation is a distraction, a detraction from the beauty.

Sometimes I don't want to know. I simply want to experience the beauty—in silence.

I continue to find that the occasional opportunity to look up into the heavens on a dark night is that kind of experience. There is a lot you could say about it, of course: the name of the constellations, the North Star, Venus, Mars sometimes. But it doesn't help much and I tell myself: "Stop it. Shut up and look."

Poetry does that, forces you to slow down, stop skimming, speed-reading, and listen to each word. Judith Valente and Charles Reynard will be here next Saturday morning to present a workshop: "Discovering the Sacred in Daily Life." She is a broadcast journalist with PBS–TV and has appeared on the *NewsHour* with Jim Lehrer. She is a former staff writer for the *Wall Street Journal* and *Washington Post*. She is also a poet. And she is married to Charles Reynard.

He is a circuit judge in Bloomington, Illinois, and former State's Attorney. He is also a poet.

I became acquainted with them when someone handed me a book they edited and wrote together, *Twenty Poems to Nourish Your Soul*. For those who find poetry intimidating—and many people do, Judy says, with reports such as "We had to read T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" in freshman English and found it so difficult, we haven't read a poem since"—this book is marvelously accessible and deeply spiritual, and yes, this is a commercial for the workshop they will present together next Saturday morning: "Discovering the Sacred in Daily Life," a wonderful way to begin the Lenten journey.

One of the poems in the book is "Star Turn," by Charles Wright:

> Nothing is quite as secretive as the way the stars
> Take off their bandages and stare out
> At the night,
> that dark rehearsal hall,
> And whisper their little songs,
> The alpha and beta ones, the ones from the great fire.

In her commentary Judith Valente writes, "Every one of us is a mystic. We may or may not realize it: we may not even like it. But whether we know it or not, whether we accept it or not, mystical experience is always there, inviting us on a journey of ultimate discovery" (p. 176).

She tells about being on a Star-Gazing Tour in Hawaii once, peering through a telescope as the guide was explaining that astronomers have

documented one hundred billion galaxies in the universe. She writes, “A hundred billion! I remember thinking that this fact alone ought to be proof of God” (p. 178).

She is such a committed stargazer that she sets her clock for 3:30 a.m. in order to see meteor showers and Mars. She reflects, “Each time, I feel myself tapped on the shoulder, as if by a rod through which the supernatural flows. Each time I sense a true connection between my small self and that expansive light-filled mystery that makes us dream of God” (p. 180).

One time something happened to three friends of Jesus—Peter, James, and John—that left them speechless, something they couldn’t begin to explain. It was something so unusual, so unlikely, so mysterious, that afterward they didn’t even try to speak about it. The incident is called the transfiguration. Jesus took the three of them up a mountain to pray. That’s a biblical signal, by the way, that something important is about to happen. Think of Mr. Sinai where God meets Moses, the Mount of Olives, the Sermon on the Mount. The way they remembered it a few decades later, when they finally got around to talking about it, Jesus’ clothes seemed to shine. Moses and Elijah appeared, and they talked about, of all things, how his life would end. They had fallen asleep, the three of them had, and they awoke in the middle of the strange experience and Peter—you can always count on Peter—Peter starts talking. He says, in essence, “Wow! This is really great. It’s so good that we are here to see this. Think about what if we missed this, but we didn’t. We’re here together and it’s so good. Let’s build. Let’s construct three sanctuaries here to preserve the moment, to remember the experience. Maybe we could come back every year on the anniversary.” Luke, the Gospel writer, is a little embarrassed by Peter’s chattering and apologizes for him: “He doesn’t know what he is saying.”

And while Peter’s going on and on about the building project, a cloud descends—another biblical signal that God is about to do or say something. Now they’re terrified and the voice says, “Be quiet. Stop talking. Listen. Listen to him. He is my son.”

That’s the day they learned that. Even though they couldn’t begin to explain it, they learned to stop talking and listen to Jesus.

And then it was all over. Luke concludes, “They kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.”

There are some experiences in life that require no commentary. There are experiences the only appropriate response to which is silence. I love Peter’s reaction. He tires to reduce this experience to something he can get his

mind around, understand, talk about, explain. He does what he has to do to make this experience on the mountain fit into his worldview.

So do we. William Placher, Presbyterian theologian who teaches at Wabash College, wrote a book with the wonderful title *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong.* Placher points out that since the Enlightenment, Western thinking has depended on reason as its ultimate criterion. Truth can be observed, analyzed, weighed, measured, explained, and understood. Mostly that's a good thing. It is the basis for the scientific method which, in turn, is one of the foundations of modernity. But if reason is the only criterion, then that which is not explainable is not real. That's what Placher means by the "domestication of transcendence." Rather than the holy, other, transcendent God of the Bible, we reduce God to ideas, concepts we can get our mind around, or we talk about God in terms that are trivial, simplistic, and altogether too comfortable. "The Man Upstairs" comes to mind, the God who helps us sell our condo or find a parking space on a snowy morning. Placher says, "When the culturally dominant pictures of God have come to be simplistic, it becomes hard to arouse much excitement about the news of divine incarnation" (Preface).

Now you need to know that preachers want to get down off that mountain as quickly as anyone. Preachers want to reduce what happened to manageable symbolism: "It was the bright sun reflecting off the snow that caused a kind of mirage and it was as if Elijah and Moses were there."

But to believe in God is to acknowledge that there is more to reality than we can explain, see, observe, more than we will ever understand. To believe in God is to acknowledge humbly that we do not know everything. To believe in God, Joseph Sittler used to teach, is an act of intellectual modesty. It is to confess that there is a lot we do not understand.

In his fine book on the Nicene Creed, Catholic scholar Luke Timothy Johnson writes, "The believer affirms that there is a mystery at the heart of the world, a mystery that does not yield to direct examination, that refuses to be measured or manipulated, yet suggests its presence in every single thing that we can feel and taste and see" (p. 68).

Pascal, the philosopher, centuries ago: "If one subjects everything to reason, our religion will lose the mystery and its supernatural character. If one offends the principles of reason, our religion will be absurd and ridiculous. There are two equally dangerous extremes, to shut reason out and to let nothing else in" (*Pensées).*

The God of the Bible is holy, other, terrible—in the best sense of the word. People are terrified, overwhelmed with awe, stunned to be in the divine

presence. When Moses gets too close to God, his face starts to shine, so he has to put a veil on to avoid scaring his neighbors.

Sometimes our religion itself forgets that. Sometimes the confidence with which religion speaks about God and God's will, God's position on this or that complex issue, God's political preferences, even God's chosen candidate, is breathtaking.

I received a poignant letter not long ago from a woman struggling with whether or not to stay in her church. She wrote, "They take all the mystery and awesomeness out of God. They know all the answers and can tell you what God felt and thought."

And then she explained: Her oldest daughter married a Muslim. They have a baby, a little girl. The writer went on, "Each time I look at her, I see the hope of a world filled with love and tolerance—but I also worry. I worry that someday people might hate her because of her last name. Each time I look at her, I know that God loves her as he loves all the little children, but I am also angry that there are some who condemn her soul to hell because she is not of the right religion and is not 'saved.' Who has given them all the answers?"

Wouldn't it be refreshing when it comes to the big questions—such as the final destiny of all of us—if the response could be a little less certain, a little less absolute about who gets in and who does not, a little less exclusive? Wouldn't it be refreshing to have a televangelist say, "We don't know the final answers. There's a mystery here that is beyond our capacity to understand. What we do know and believe is that God is merciful and just and kind and that God's love is unconditional"?

Let's not be too quick to come down from the mountain. Most of us live very busy lives. We work long and hard. Our schedules are full, our calendars crowded, our days begin early in the morning and continue into the evening.

When we have an hour or two, there are errands to do, grocery shopping, thank-you notes to write.

When people ask, "How are you?" most of us can't answer that question without saying, "I'm busy."

And part of what this story suggests is that we need to go to the mountaintop now and then. We need some downtime, some empty space, some silence, for the sake of our spirits, not to mention our health and sanity. We need a time and place where nothing is happening, nothing is being said, even if we use it like the disciples did, to take a nap.

Let’s not be too quick to come down from the mountain. Let’s stay there—in the wondrous, mysterious, awe-ful silence for a while.

But he did come down from the mountain. They followed him down. Instead of building those three buildings, they came down from the mountain and were met by a great crowd. And out of the crowd came a shout, a desperate plea for help from a frantic father. “Teacher, my son, my only son—a spirit seizes him. He convulses and foams at the mouth. Please help us.” While he spoke, the young boy had a seizure and fell to the ground convulsing.

Think of the rhythm of that: from the mystical cloud on the mountain, the experience of God’s holy transcendence, Jesus’ own participation in the unexplainable holiness, down to this—to a crowd, a frantic father, a desperately sick boy lying in the dirt, convulsing.

There is something in that rhythm of the very heart of Christianity: the mysterious holiness of the mountain and the blunt reality of human life and human need and human suffering. Because we are so eager to get off the mountain, so uncomfortable with the very idea of anything we cannot understand and explain, the New Testament scholars want us to stay up there for a while, in silent awe.

But I’ve always seen what comes next—the walk down from the mountain into the valley of human need and suffering—as a metaphor, a picture of what the church is for: to bring us into the awesome presence of God, to remind us that we live our lives in the presence of God, to point to the sacred, the holy, the Godly in everyday life. And to lead us, in the name of God, into the crowd, the city, the valley of human need where little children are sick and frantic parents cry out for help. Both—And. Both worship and service: both glorious hymns that remind us of mystery and holiness *and* Sunday Night Supper shared with the hungry and homeless. The quiet intimacy of the prayers of the people on Sunday morning and the noisy chaos of a busload of Cabrini-Green youngsters emptying out on Delaware Place on their way to Tutoring on Monday night. A gorgeous anthem by the Morning Choir and a blood pressure test administered to an elderly woman in the Center for Whole Health. The elegant silence of the Lord’s Supper and the man who comes to the Counseling Center because he is drinking too much and a once-precious marriage is coming apart.

Jim Wallis, editor of *Sojourners* magazine, says, “In Jesus, God hits the streets.”

There is truth up there in the mystical silence on the mountain, and there is truth in the coming down from the mountain to the valley. There is purpose and challenge and mission.

We begin this week the journey of Lent, the time when we turn our attention to Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and to that final mystery, his death on the cross.

For all the mystery on the mountaintop, there is nothing more mysterious than divine, holy love walking into the city, coming fully into human life, the valley of human need, and there suffering and dying for us. What we ponder and celebrate in Lent doesn't fit our worldview either: love that pours itself out, love that suffers and dies. There is no mystery more profound than that: that somehow the death of Jesus at the hands of the authorities after three short years of teaching and healing was far more than a tragedy of history; it was a gesture of love in which is our salvation.

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy," Hamlet says.

God, for instance.
God's creation of the world and human life in the world.
The stars and galaxies.
God's love.

And the mystery of that man, teaching, healing, loving, making his way to his cross for you and me: "And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen."

There are experiences in this life of ours the only appropriate response to which is silence.

Amen.